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ABSTRACT

This guide presents a brief summary of the research on violence prevention and intervention and crisis response in schools. It tells school communities: (1) what to look for--the early warning signs that relate to violence and other troubling student behavior; and (2) what to do--the action steps that school communities can take to prevent violence and other troubling behaviors, to intervene and get help for troubled children, and to respond to school violence when it occurs. Sections in this guide include: (1) "Introduction," describing the rationale for the guide and suggesting how it can be used by schools to develop a plan of action; (2) "Characteristics of a School That Is Safe and Responsive to All Children," describing characteristics of schools that support prevention, appropriate intervention, and effective crisis response; (3) "Early Warning Signs," presenting early warning signs of a troubled student, imminent warning signs, and the principles that ensure these signs will not be misinterpreted (concludes with a brief description of using the signs to shape intervention practices); (4) "Getting Help for Troubled Children," describing what to do when intervening early with students who are at risk for behavioral problems, when responding with intensive interventions for individual children, and when providing a foundation to prevent and reduce violent behavior; (5) "Developing a Prevention and Response Plan," offering suggestions for such plans; (6) "Responding to Crisis," describing what to do when intervening during a crisis to ensure safety and when responding in the aftermath of crisis; (7) "Conclusion"; and (8) "Methodology, Contributors and Research Support," describing the rigorous development and review process used in producing the guide, and providing information about the project's World Wide Web site. A final section lists resources that can be contacted for more information. (AA)

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A Guide to Safe Schools

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August 1998

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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

WASHINGTON, D.C. 20202

August 22, 1998

Dear Principal and Teachers:

On June 13, after the tragic loss of life and injuries at Thurston High School in Springfield, Oregon, President Clinton directed the Department of Education and the Department of Justice to develop an early warning guide to help "adults reach out to troubled children quickly and effectively." This guide responds to that Presidential request. It is our sincere hope that this guide will provide you with the practical help needed to keep every child in your school out of harm's way.

America's schools are among the safest places to be on a day-to-day basis, due to the strong commitment of educators, parents, and communities to their children. Nevertheless, last year's tragic and sudden acts of violence in our nation's schools remind us that no community can be complacent in its efforts to make its schools even safer. An effective and safe school is the vital center of every community whether it is in a large urban area or a small rural community.

Central to this guide are the key insights that keeping children safe is a community-wide effort and that effective schools create environments where children and young people truly feel connected. This is why our common goal must be to reconnect with every child and particularly with those young people who are isolated and troubled.

This guide should be seen as part of an overall effort to make sure that every school in this nation has a comprehensive violence prevention plan in place. We also caution you to recognize that over labeling and using this guide to stigmatize children in a cursory way that leads to over-reaction is harmful. The guidelines in this report are based on research and the positive experiences of schools around the country where the value and potential of each and every child is cherished and where good practices have produced, and continue to produce, successful students and communities.

We are grateful to the many experts, agencies, and associations in education, law enforcement, juvenile justice, mental health, and other social services that worked closely with us to make sure that this report is available for the start of school this fall. We hope that you and your students and staff, as well as parents and the community, will benefit from this information.

Sincerely,

Richard W. Riley
Secretary
U.S. Department of Education

Janet Reno
Attorney General
U.S. Department of Justice

Our mission is to ensure equal access to education and to promote educational excellence throughout the Nation.

Early Warning, Timely Response

A Guide to Safe Schools

Although most schools are safe, the violence that occurs in our neighborhoods and communities has found its way inside the schoolhouse door. However, if we understand what leads to violence and the types of support that research has shown are effective in preventing violence, we can make our schools safer.

Research-based practices can help school communities—administrators, teachers, families, students, support staff, and community members—recognize the warning signs early, so children can get the help they need before it is too late. This guide presents a brief summary of the research on violence prevention and intervention and crisis response in schools. It tells school communities:

- **What to look for**—the early warning signs that relate to violence and other troubling behaviors.
- **What to do**—the action steps that school communities can take to prevent violence and other troubling behaviors, to intervene and get help for troubled children, and to respond to school violence when it occurs.

Sections in this guide include:

- **Section 1: Introduction**. All staff, students, parents, and members of the community must be part of creating a safe school environment. Schools must have in place approaches for addressing the needs of all children who have troubling behaviors. This section describes the rationale for the guide and suggests how it can be used by school communities to develop a plan of action.
- **Section 2: Characteristics of a School That Is Safe and Responsive to All Children**. Well functioning schools foster learning, safety, and socially appropriate behaviors. They have a strong academic focus and support students in achieving high standards, foster positive relationships between school staff and students, and promote meaningful parental and community involvement. This section describes characteristics of schools that support prevention, appropriate intervention, and effective crisis response.
- **Section 3: Early Warning Signs**. There are early warning

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signs that, when viewed in context, can signal a troubled child. Educators and parents—and in some cases, students—can use several significant principles to ensure that the early warning signs are not misinterpreted. This section presents early warning signs, imminent warning signs, and the principles that ensure these signs will not be misinterpreted. It concludes with a brief description of using the early warning signs to shape intervention practices.

- **Section 4: Getting Help for Troubled Children**. Effective interventions for improving the behavior of troubled children are well documented in the research literature. This section presents research- and expert-based principles that should provide the foundation for all intervention development. It describes what to do when intervening early with students who are at risk for behavioral problems, when responding with intensive interventions for individual children, and when providing a foundation to prevent and reduce violent behavior.

- **Section 5: Developing a Prevention and Response Plan**. Effective schools create a violence prevention and response plan and form a team that can ensure it is implemented. They use approaches and strategies based on research about what works. This section offers suggestions for developing such plans.

- **Section 6: Responding to Crisis**. Effective and safe schools are well prepared for any potential crisis or violent act. This section describes what to do when intervening during a crisis to ensure safety and when responding in the aftermath of crisis. The principles that underlie effective crisis response are included.

- **Section 7: Conclusion**. This section summarizes the guide.

- **Section 8: Methodology, Contributors, and Research Support**. This guide synthesizes an extensive knowledge base on violence and violence prevention. This section describes the rigorous development and review process that was used. It also provides information about the project's Web site.

A final section lists resources that can be contacted for more information.

The information in this guide is not intended as a comprehensive prevention, intervention, and response plan—school communities could do ***everything*** recommended and still experience violence. Rather, the intent is to provide school communities with reliable and practical information about what they can do to be prepared and to reduce the likelihood of violence.

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A Guide to Safe Schools

Most schools are safe. Although fewer than one percent of all violent deaths of children occur on school grounds—indeed, a child is far more likely to be killed in the community or at home—no school is immune.

The violence that occurs in our neighborhoods and communities has found its way inside the schoolhouse door. And while we can take some solace in the knowledge that schools are among the safest places for young people, we must do more. School violence reflects a much broader problem, one that can only be addressed when everyone—at school, at home, and in the community—works together.

The 1997-1998 school year served as a dramatic wake-up call to the fact that guns do come to school, and some students will use them to kill. One after the other, school communities across the country—from Oregon to Virginia, from Arkansas to Pennsylvania, from Mississippi to Kentucky—have been forced to face the fact that violence can happen to them. And while these serious incidents trouble us deeply, they should not prevent us from acting to prevent school violence of any kind.

There is ample documentation that prevention and early intervention efforts can reduce violence and other troubling behaviors in schools. Research-based practices can help school communities recognize the warning signs early, so children can get the help they need before it is too late. In fact, research suggests that some of the most promising prevention and intervention strategies involve the entire educational community—administrators, teachers, families, students, support staff, and community members—working together to form positive relationships with all children.

If we understand what leads to violence and the types of support that research has shown are effective in preventing violence and other troubling behaviors, we can make our schools safer.

About This Guide

This guide presents a brief summary of the research on violence prevention and intervention and crisis response in schools (see Section 8 for a review of methodology and information on how to locate the research). It tells members of school communities—especially administrators, teachers, staff, families, students, and community-based professionals:

- ***What to look for***—the early warning signs that relate to violence and other troubling behaviors.
- ***What to do***—the action steps that school communities can take to prevent violence and other troubling behaviors, to intervene and get help for

troubled children, and to respond to school violence when it occurs.

The information in each section is not intended as a comprehensive prevention, intervention, and response system or plan. Indeed, school violence occurs in a unique context in every school and every situation, making a one-size-fits-all scheme impossible. Moreover, school communities could do **everything** recommended and still experience violence. Rather, this guide is designed to provide school communities with reliable and practical information about what they can do to be prepared and to reduce the likelihood of violence.

Creating a safe school requires having in place many preventive measures for children's mental and emotional problems—as well as a comprehensive approach to early identification of **all** warning signs that might lead to violence toward self or others. The term "violence" as used in this booklet, refers to a broad range of troubling behaviors and emotions shown by students—including serious aggression, physical attacks, suicide, dangerous use of drugs, and other dangerous interpersonal behaviors. However, the early warning signs presented in this document focus primarily on aggressive and violent behaviors toward others. The guide does not attempt to address all of the warning signs related to depression and suicide. Nevertheless, some of the signs of potential violence toward others are also signs of depression and suicidal risk, which should be addressed through early identification and appropriate intervention.

"Violence is a major concern to parents, students, teachers, and the administration of any school. We have found that our best plan starts with prevention and awareness. At our middle school, the school psychologist, in conjunction with the assistant principal, has developed an anti-intimidation and threat plan. Our school statistics reflect a dramatic decline in violence from the 1996-97 to the 1997-98 school year. We treat each and every student with respect. We are finding that they in turn are demonstrating a more respectful attitude."

G. Norma Villar Baker, Principal, Midvale, UT

Using the Guide To Develop a Plan of Action

All staff, students, parents, and members of the community must be part of creating a safe school environment:

- **Everyone** has a personal responsibility for reducing the risk of violence. We must take steps to maintain order, demonstrate mutual respect and caring for one another, and ensure that children who are troubled get the help they need.
- **Everyone** should have an understanding of the early warning signs that help identify students who may be headed for trouble.
- **Everyone** should be prepared to respond appropriately in a crisis situation.

Research and expert-based information offers a wealth of knowledge about preventing violence in schools. The following sections provide information—what to look for and what to do—that school communities can use when developing or enhancing violence prevention and response plans (see Section 5 for more information about these plans).

We hope that school communities will use this document as a guide as they begin the prevention and healing process today, at all age and grade levels, and for all students.

Characteristics of a School That Is Safe and Responsive to All Children

Well functioning schools foster learning, safety, and socially appropriate behaviors. They have a strong academic focus and support students in achieving high standards, foster positive relationships between school staff and students, and promote meaningful parental and community involvement. Most prevention programs in effective schools address multiple factors and recognize that safety and order are related to children's social, emotional, and academic development.

Effective prevention, intervention, and crisis response strategies operate best in school communities that:

- **Focus on academic achievement.** Effective schools convey the attitude that all children can achieve academically and behave appropriately, while at the same time appreciating individual differences. Adequate resources and programs help ensure that expectations are met. Expectations are communicated clearly, with the understanding that meeting such expectations is a responsibility of the student, the school, and the home. Students who do not receive the support they need are less likely to behave in socially desirable ways.
- **Involve families in meaningful ways.** Students whose families are involved in their growth in and outside of school are more likely to experience school success and less likely to become involved in antisocial activities. School communities must make parents feel welcome in school, address barriers to their participation, and keep families positively engaged in their children's education. Effective schools also support families in expressing concerns about their children—and they support families in getting the help they need to address behaviors that cause concern.
- **Develop links to the community.** Everyone must be committed to improving schools. Schools that have close ties to families, support services, community police, the faith-based community, and the community at large can benefit from many valuable resources. When these links are weak, the risk of school violence is heightened and the opportunity to serve children who are at risk for violence or who may be affected by it is decreased.
- **Emphasize positive relationships among students and staff.** Research shows that a

positive relationship with an adult who is available to provide support when needed is one of the most critical factors in preventing student violence. Students often look to adults in the school community for guidance, support, and direction. Some children need help overcoming feelings of isolation and support in developing connections to others. Effective schools make sure that opportunities exist for adults to spend quality, personal time with children. Effective schools also foster positive student interpersonal relations—they encourage students to help each other and to feel comfortable assisting others in getting help when needed.

- **Discuss safety issues openly.** Children come to school with many different perceptions—and misconceptions—about death, violence, and the use of weapons. Schools can reduce the risk of violence by teaching children about the dangers of firearms, as well as appropriate strategies for dealing with feelings, expressing anger in appropriate ways, and resolving conflicts. Schools also should teach children that they are responsible for their actions and that the choices they make have consequences for which they will be held accountable.

- **Treat students with equal respect.** A major source of conflict in many schools is the perceived or real problem of bias and unfair treatment of students because of ethnicity, gender, race, social class, religion, disability, nationality, sexual orientation, physical appearance, or some other factor—both by staff and by peers. Students who have been treated unfairly may become scapegoats and/or targets of violence. In some cases, victims may react in aggressive ways. Effective schools communicate to students and the greater community that all children are valued and respected. There is a deliberate and systematic effort—for example, displaying children's artwork, posting academic work prominently throughout the building, respecting students' diversity—to establish a climate that demonstrates care and a sense of community.

- **Create ways for students to share their concerns.** It has been found that peers often are the most likely group to know in advance about potential school violence. Schools must create ways for students to safely report such troubling behaviors that may lead to dangerous situations. And students who report potential school violence must be protected. It is important for schools to support and foster positive relationships between students and adults so students will feel safe providing information about a potentially dangerous situation.

- **Help children feel safe expressing their feelings.** It is very important that children feel safe when expressing their needs, fears, and anxieties to school staff. When they do not have access to caring adults, feelings of isolation, rejection, and disappointment are more likely to occur, increasing the probability of acting-out behaviors.

"I just recently got out of the hospital. I was a victim of a shooting at my school. I've been teaching for 20 years and I never thought it could happen at my school. Some of the kids knew about it before it happened, but they didn't want to say anything—they have a code of honor and they did not want to tattle tale. But someone has to stand up, someone has to take a stand because, if you don't, then somebody else is going to get hurt."

Gregory Carter, Teacher, Richmond, VA

- **Have in place a system for referring children who are suspected of being abused or neglected.** The referral system must be appropriate and reflect federal and state guidelines.
- **Offer extended day programs for children.** School-based before- and after-school programs can be effective in reducing violence. Effective programs are well supervised and provide children with support and a range of options, such as counseling, tutoring, mentoring, cultural arts, community service, clubs, access to computers, and help with homework.
- **Promote good citizenship and character.** In addition to their academic mission, schools must help students become good citizens. First, schools stand for the civic values set forth in our Constitution and Bill of Rights (patriotism; freedom of religion, speech, and press; equal protection/nondiscrimination; and due process/fairness). Schools also reinforce and promote the shared values of their local communities, such as honesty, kindness, responsibility, and respect for others. Schools should acknowledge that parents are the primary moral educators of their children and work in partnership with them.
- **Identify problems and assess progress toward solutions.** Schools must openly and objectively examine circumstances that are potentially dangerous for students and staff and situations where members of the school community feel threatened or intimidated. Safe schools continually assess progress by identifying problems and collecting information regarding progress toward solutions. Moreover, effective schools share this information with students, families, and the community at large.
- **Support students in making the transition to adult life and the workplace.** Youth need assistance in planning their future and in developing skills that will result in success. For example, schools can provide students with community service opportunities, work-study programs, and apprenticeships that help connect them to caring adults in the community. These relationships, when established early, foster in youth a sense of hope and security for the future.

Research has demonstrated repeatedly that school communities can do a great deal to prevent violence. Having in place a safe and responsive foundation helps **all** children—and it enables school communities to provide more efficient and effective services to students who need more support. The next step is to learn the early warning signs of a child who is troubled, so that effective interventions can be provided.

"We must avoid fragmentation in implementing programs. The concepts in preventing and responding to violence must be integrated into effective school reform, including socially and academically supportive instruction and caring, a welcoming atmosphere, and providing good options for recreation and enrichment."

Howard Adelman, Professor of Psychology, University of California, Los Angeles

Early Warning Signs

Use the Signs Responsibly

It is important to avoid inappropriately labeling or stigmatizing individual students because they appear to fit a specific profile or set of early warning indicators. It's okay to be worried about a child, but it's not okay to overreact and jump to conclusions.

Why didn't we see it coming? In the wake of violence, we ask this question not so much to place blame, but to understand better what we can do to prevent such an occurrence from ever happening again. We review over and over in our minds the days leading up to the incident—did the child say or do anything that would have cued us in to the impending crisis? Did we miss an opportunity to help?

There are early warning signs in most cases of violence to self and others—certain behavioral and emotional signs that, when viewed in context, can signal a troubled child. But early warning signs are just that—indicators that a student may need help.

Such signs may or may not indicate a serious problem—they do not necessarily mean that a child is prone to violence toward self or others. Rather, early warning signs provide us with the impetus to check out our concerns and address the child's needs. Early warning signs allow us to act responsibly by getting help for the child before problems escalate.

Early warning signs can help frame concern for a child. However, it is important to avoid inappropriately labeling or stigmatizing individual students because they appear to fit a specific profile or set of early warning indicators. It's okay to be worried about a child, but it's not okay to overreact and jump to conclusions.

Teachers and administrators—and other school support staff—are not professionally trained to analyze children's feelings and motives. But they are on the front line when it comes to observing troublesome behavior and making referrals to appropriate professionals, such as school psychologists, social workers, counselors, and nurses. They also play a significant role in responding to diagnostic information provided by specialists. Thus, it is no surprise that effective schools take special care in training the entire school community to understand and identify early warning signs.

When staff members seek help for a troubled child, when friends report worries about a peer or friend, when parents raise concerns about their child's thoughts or habits, children can get the help they need. By actively sharing information, a school community can provide quick, effective responses.

Principles for Identifying the Early Warning Signs of School Violence

Educators and families can increase their ability to recognize early warning signs by establishing close, caring, and supportive

relationships with children and youth—getting to know them well enough to be aware of their needs, feelings, attitudes, and behavior patterns. Educators and parents together can review school records for patterns of behavior or sudden changes in behavior.

Unfortunately, **there is a real danger that early warning signs will be misinterpreted**. Educators and parents—and in some cases, students—can ensure that the early warning signs are not misinterpreted by using several significant principles to better understand them. These principles include:

- **Do no harm.** There are certain risks associated with using early warning signs to identify children who are troubled. First and foremost, the intent should be to get help for a child early. The early warning signs should not to be used as rationale to exclude, isolate, or punish a child. Nor should they be used as a checklist for formally identifying, mislabeling, or stereotyping children. Formal disability identification under federal law requires individualized evaluation by qualified professionals. In addition, all referrals to outside agencies based on the early warning signs must be kept confidential and must be done with parental consent (except referrals for suspected child abuse or neglect).
- **Understand violence and aggression within a context.** Violence is contextual. Violent and aggressive behavior as an expression of emotion may have many antecedent factors—factors that exist within the school, the home, and the larger social environment. In fact, for those children who are at risk for aggression and violence, certain environments or situations can set it off. Some children may act out if stress becomes too great, if they lack positive coping skills, and if they have learned to react with aggression.
- **Avoid stereotypes.** Stereotypes can interfere with—and even harm—the school community's ability to identify and help children. It is important to be aware of false cues—including race, socio-economic status, cognitive or academic ability, or physical appearance. In fact, such stereotypes can unfairly harm children, especially when the school community acts upon them.
- **View warning signs within a developmental context.** Children and youth at different levels of development have varying social and emotional capabilities. They may express their needs differently in elementary, middle, and high school. The point is to know what is developmentally typical behavior, so that behaviors are not misinterpreted.
- **Understand that children typically exhibit multiple warning signs.** It is common for children who are troubled to exhibit multiple signs. Research confirms that most children who are troubled and at risk for aggression exhibit more than one warning sign, repeatedly, and with increasing intensity over time. Thus, it is important not to overreact to single signs, words, or actions.

"When doing consultation with school staff and families, we advise them to think of the early warning signs within a context. We encourage them to look for combinations of warning signs that might tell us the student's behavior is changing and becoming more problematic."

Deborah Crockett, School Psychologist, Atlanta, GA

Early Warning Signs

It is not always possible to predict behavior that will lead to violence. However, educators and parents—and sometimes students—can recognize certain early warning signs. In some situations and for some youth, different combinations of events, behaviors, and emotions may lead to aggressive rage or violent behavior toward self or others. A good rule of thumb is to assume that these warning signs, especially when they are presented in combination, indicate a need for further analysis to determine an appropriate intervention.

We know from research that most children who become violent toward self or others feel rejected and psychologically victimized. In most cases, children exhibit aggressive behavior early in life and, if not provided support, will continue a progressive developmental pattern toward severe aggression or violence. However, research also shows that when children have a positive, meaningful connection to an adult—whether it be at home, in school, or in the community—the potential for violence is reduced significantly.

None of these signs alone is sufficient for predicting aggression and violence. Moreover, it is inappropriate—and potentially harmful—to use the early warning signs as a checklist against which to match individual children. Rather, the early warning signs are offered only as an aid in identifying and referring children who may need help. School communities must ensure that staff and students only use the early warning signs for identification and referral purposes—only trained professionals should make diagnoses in consultation with the child's parents or guardian.

The following early warning signs are presented with the following qualifications: They are not equally significant and they are not presented in order of seriousness. The early warning signs include:

- ***Social withdrawal.*** In some situations, gradual and eventually complete withdrawal from social contacts can be an important indicator of a troubled child. The withdrawal often stems from feelings of depression, rejection, persecution, unworthiness, and lack of confidence.
- ***Excessive feelings of isolation and being alone.*** Research has shown that the majority of children who are isolated and appear to be friendless are not violent. In fact, these feelings are sometimes characteristic of children and youth who may be troubled, withdrawn, or have internal issues that hinder development of social affiliations. However, research also has shown that in some cases feelings of isolation and not having friends are associated with children who behave aggressively and violently.
- ***Excessive feelings of rejection.*** In the process of growing up, and in the course of adolescent development, many young people experience emotionally painful rejection. Children who are troubled often are isolated from their mentally healthy peers. Their responses to rejection will depend on many background factors. Without support, they may be at risk of ex-

Use the Signs Responsibly

None of these signs alone is sufficient for predicting aggression and violence. Moreover, it is inappropriate—and potentially harmful—to use the early warning signs as a checklist against which to match individual children.

pressing their emotional distress in negative ways—including violence. Some aggressive children who are rejected by non-aggressive peers seek out aggressive friends who, in turn, reinforce their violent tendencies.

- ***Being a victim of violence.*** Children who are victims of violence—including physical or sexual abuse—in the community, at school, or at home are sometimes at risk themselves of becoming violent toward themselves or others.
- ***Feelings of being picked on and persecuted.*** The youth who feels constantly picked on, teased, bullied, singled out for ridicule, and humiliated at home or at school may initially withdraw socially. If not given adequate support in addressing these feelings, some children may vent them in inappropriate ways—including possible aggression or violence.
- ***Low school interest and poor academic performance.*** Poor school achievement can be the result of many factors. It is important to consider whether there is a drastic change in performance and/or poor performance becomes a chronic condition that limits the child's capacity to learn. In some situations—such as when the low achiever feels frustrated, unworthy, chastised, and denigrated—acting out and aggressive behaviors may occur. It is important to assess the emotional and cognitive reasons for the academic performance change to determine the true nature of the problem.
- ***Expression of violence in writings and drawings.*** Children and youth often express their thoughts, feelings, desires, and intentions in their drawings and in stories, poetry, and other written expressive forms. Many children produce work about violent themes that for the most part is harmless when taken in context. However, an overrepresentation of violence in writings and drawings that is directed at specific individuals (family members, peers, other adults) consistently over time, may signal emotional problems and the potential for violence. Because there is a real danger in misdiagnosing such a sign, it is important to seek the guidance of a qualified professional—such as a school psychologist, counselor, or other mental health specialist—to determine its meaning.
- ***Uncontrolled anger.*** Everyone gets angry; anger is a natural emotion. However, anger that is expressed frequently and intensely in response to minor irritants may signal potential violent behavior toward self or others.
- ***Patterns of impulsive and chronic hitting, intimidating, and bullying behaviors.*** Children often engage in acts of shoving and mild aggression. However, some mildly aggressive behaviors such as constant hitting and bullying of others that occur early in children's lives, if left unattended, might later escalate into more serious behaviors.
- ***History of discipline problems.*** Chronic behavior and disciplinary problems both in school and at home may suggest that underlying emotional needs are not being met. These unmet

needs may be manifested in acting out and aggressive behaviors. These problems may set the stage for the child to violate norms and rules, defy authority, disengage from school, and engage in aggressive behaviors with other children and adults.

- ***Past history of violent and aggressive behavior.*** Unless provided with support and counseling, a youth who has a history of aggressive or violent behavior is likely to repeat those behaviors. Aggressive and violent acts may be directed toward other individuals, be expressed in cruelty to animals, or include fire setting. Youth who show an early pattern of antisocial behavior frequently and across multiple settings are particularly at risk for future aggressive and antisocial behavior. Similarly, youth who engage in overt behaviors such as bullying, generalized aggression and defiance, and covert behaviors such as stealing, vandalism, lying, cheating, and fire setting also are at risk for more serious aggressive behavior. Research suggests that age of onset may be a key factor in interpreting early warning signs. For example, children who engage in aggression and drug abuse at an early age (before age 12) are more likely to show violence later on than are children who begin such behavior at an older age. In the presence of such signs it is important to review the child's history with behavioral experts and seek parents' observations and insights.

- ***Intolerance for differences and prejudicial attitudes.*** All children have likes and dislikes. However, an intense prejudice toward others based on racial, ethnic, religious, language, gender, sexual orientation, ability, and physical appearance—when coupled with other factors—may lead to violent assaults against those who are perceived to be different. Membership in hate groups or the willingness to victimize individuals with disabilities or health problems also should be treated as early warning signs.

- ***Drug use and alcohol use.*** Apart from being unhealthy behaviors, drug use and alcohol use reduces self-control and exposes children and youth to violence, either as perpetrators, as victims, or both.

- ***Affiliation with gangs***. Gangs that support anti-social values and behaviors—including extortion, intimidation, and acts of violence toward other students—cause fear and stress among other students. Youth who are influenced by these groups—those who emulate and copy their behavior, as well as those who become affiliated with them—may adopt these values and act in violent or aggressive ways in certain situations. Gang-related violence and turf battles are common occurrences tied to the use of drugs that often result in injury and/or death.

- ***Inappropriate access to, possession of, and use of firearms.*** Children and youth who inappropriately possess or have access to firearms can have an increased risk for violence. Research shows that such youngsters also have a higher probability of becoming victims. Families can reduce inappropriate access and use by restrict-

ing, monitoring, and supervising children's access to firearms and other weapons. Children who have a history of aggression, impulsiveness, or other emotional problems should not have access to firearms and other weapons.

- ***Serious threats of violence.*** Idle threats are a common response to frustration. Alternatively, one of the most reliable indicators that a youth is likely to commit a dangerous act toward self or others is a detailed and specific threat to use violence. Recent incidents across the country clearly indicate that threats to commit violence against oneself or others should be taken very seriously. Steps must be taken to understand the nature of these threats and to prevent them from being carried out.

Identifying and Responding to Imminent Warning Signs

Unlike early warning signs, imminent warning signs indicate that a student is very close to behaving in a way that is potentially dangerous to self and/or to others. Imminent warning signs require an immediate response.

No single warning sign can predict that a dangerous act will occur. Rather, imminent warning signs usually are presented as a sequence of overt, serious, hostile behaviors or threats directed at peers, staff, or other individuals. Usually, imminent warning signs are evident to more than one staff member—as well as to the child's family.

Imminent warning signs may include:

- Serious physical fighting with peers or family members.
- Severe destruction of property.
- Severe rage for seemingly minor reasons.
- Detailed threats of lethal violence.
- Possession and/or use of firearms and other weapons.
- Other self-injurious behaviors or threats of suicide.

When warning signs indicate that danger is imminent, safety must **always** be the first and foremost consideration. Action must be taken immediately. Immediate intervention by school authorities and possibly law enforcement officers is needed when a child:

- Has presented a detailed plan (time, place, method) to harm or kill others—particularly if the child has a history of aggression or has attempted to carry out threats in the past.
- Is carrying a weapon, particularly a firearm, and has threatened to use it.

In situations where students present other threatening behaviors, **parents should be informed of the concerns immediately**. School communities also have the responsibility to seek assistance from appropriate agencies, such as child and family services and community mental health. These responses should reflect school board policies and be consistent with the violence prevention and response plan (for more information see Section 5).

Know the Law

The ***Gun Free Schools Act*** requires that each state receiving federal funds under the ***Elementary and Secondary Education Act*** (ESEA) must have put in effect, by October 1995, a state law requiring local educational agencies to expel from school for a period of not less than one year a student who is determined to have brought a firearm to school.

Each state's law also must allow the chief administering officer of the local educational agency to modify the expulsion requirement on a case-by-case basis. All local educational agencies receiving ESEA funds must have a policy that requires the referral of any student who brings a firearm to school to the criminal justice or juvenile justice system.

Using the Early Warning Signs To Shape Intervention Practices

An early warning sign is not a predictor that a child or youth will commit a violent act toward self or others. Effective schools recognize the potential in every child to overcome difficult experiences and to control negative emotions. Adults in these school communities use their knowledge of early warning signs to address problems before they escalate into violence.

Effective school communities support staff, students, and families in understanding the early warning signs. Support strategies include having:

- School board policies in place that support training and ongoing consultation. The entire school community knows how to identify early warning signs, and understands the principles that support them.
- School leaders who encourage others to raise concerns about observed early warning signs and to report all observations of imminent warning signs immediately. This is in addition to school district policies that sanction and promote the identification of early warning signs.
- Easy access to a team of specialists trained in evaluating and addressing serious behavioral and academic concerns.

Each school community should develop a procedure that students and staff can follow when reporting their concerns about a child who exhibits early warning signs. For example, in many schools the principal is the first point of contact. In cases that do not pose imminent danger, the principal contacts a school psychologist or other qualified professional, who takes responsibility for addressing the concern immediately. If the concern is determined to be serious—but not to pose a threat of imminent danger—the child's family should be contacted. The family should be consulted before implementing any interventions with the child. In cases where school-based contextual factors are determined to be causing or exacerbating the child's troubling behavior, the school should act quickly to modify them.

It is often difficult to acknowledge that a child is troubled. Everyone—including administrators, families, teachers, school staff, students, and community members—may find it too troubling sometimes to admit that a child close to them needs help. When faced with resistance or denial, school communities must persist to ensure that children get the help they need.

Understanding early and imminent warning signs is an essential step in ensuring a safe school. The next step involves supporting the emotional and behavioral adjustment of children.

"Being proactive and having the ability to consult and meet with my school psychologist on an ongoing basis has helped create a positive school environment in terms of resolving student issues prior to their reaching a crisis level."

J. Randy Alton, Teacher, Bethesda, MD

Intervention: Getting Help for Troubled Children

Prevention approaches have proved effective in enabling school communities to decrease the frequency and intensity of behavior problems. However, prevention programs alone cannot eliminate the problems of all students. Some 5 to 10 percent of students will need more intensive interventions to decrease their high-risk behaviors, although the percentage can vary among schools and communities.

What happens when we recognize early warning signs in a child?

The message is clear: It's okay to be concerned when you notice warning signs in a child—and it's even more appropriate to do something about those concerns. School communities that encourage staff, families, and students to raise concerns about observed warning signs—and that have in place a process for getting help to troubled children once they are identified—are more likely to have effective schools with reduced disruption, bullying, fighting, and other forms of aggression.

Principles Underlying Intervention

Violence prevention and response plans should consider both prevention and intervention. Plans also should provide all staff with easy access to a team of specialists trained in evaluating serious behavioral and academic concerns. Eligible students should have access to special education services, and classroom teachers should be able to consult school psychologists, other mental health specialists, counselors, reading specialists, and special educators.

Effective practices for improving the behavior of troubled children are well documented in the research literature. Research has shown that effective interventions are culturally appropriate, family-supported, individualized, coordinated, and monitored. Further, interventions are more effective when they are designed and implemented consistently over time with input from the child, the family, and appropriate professionals. Schools also can draw upon the resources of their community to strengthen and enhance intervention planning.

When drafting a violence prevention and response plan, it is helpful to consider certain principles that research or expert-based experience show have a significant impact on success. The principles include:

- **Share responsibility by establishing a partnership with the child, school, home, and community.** Coordinated service systems should be available for children who are at risk for violent behavior. Effective schools

"Partnerships with local community agencies have created a safer school and community."

Sally Baas, Educator, Coon Rapids, MN

"Students should feel a sense of responsibility to inform someone if they're made aware of an individual who may perform a violent act. They should not feel like they are tattle telling, but more in the sense of saving someone's life. Students should have a role on the school's violence prevention and response team because they know what points of student life and school to target."

Elsa Quiroga, Graduate of Mount Eden High School and Student, University of California at Berkeley

reach out to include families and the entire community in the education of children. In addition, effective schools coordinate and collaborate with child and family service agencies, law enforcement and juvenile justice systems, mental health agencies, businesses, faith and ethnic leaders, and other community agencies.

- **Inform parents and listen to them when early warning signs are observed.** Parents should be involved as soon as possible. Effective and safe schools make persistent efforts to involve parents by: informing them routinely about school discipline policies, procedures, and rules, and about their children's behavior (both good and bad); involving them in making decisions concerning schoolwide disciplinary policies and procedures; and encouraging them to participate in prevention programs, intervention programs, and crisis planning. Parents need to know what school-based interventions are being used with their children and how they can support their success.

- **Maintain confidentiality and parents' rights to privacy.** Parental involvement and consent is required before personally identifiable information is shared with other agencies, except in the case of emergencies or suspicion of abuse. The *Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act* (FERPA), a federal law that addresses the privacy of education records, must be observed in all referrals to or sharing of information with other community agencies. Furthermore, parent-approved interagency communication must be kept confidential. FERPA does not prevent disclosure of personally identifiable information to appropriate parties—such as law enforcement officials, trained medical personnel, and other emergency personnel—when responsible personnel determine there is an acute emergency (imminent danger).

- **Develop the capacity of staff, students, and families to intervene.** Many school staff members are afraid of saying or doing the wrong thing when faced with a potentially violent student. Effective schools provide the entire school community—teachers, students, parents, support staff—with training and support in responding to imminent warning signs, preventing violence, and intervening safely and effectively. Interventions must be monitored by professionals who are competent in the approach. According to researchers, programs do not succeed without the ongoing support of administrators, parents, and community leaders.

- **Support students in being responsible for their actions.** Effective school communities encourage students to see themselves as responsible for their actions, and actively engage them in planning, implementing, and evaluating violence prevention initiatives.

- **Simplify staff requests for urgent assistance.** Many school systems and community agencies have complex legalistic referral systems with timelines and waiting lists. Children who are at risk of endangering them-

Tips for Parents

▲ ***Parents can help create safe schools. Here are some ideas that parents in other communities have tried:***

- Discuss the school's discipline policy with your child. Show your support for the rules, and help your child understand the reasons for them.
- Involve your child in setting rules for appropriate behavior at home.
- Talk with your child about the violence he or she sees—on television, in video games, and possibly in the neighborhood. Help your child understand the consequences of violence.
- Teach your child how to solve problems. Praise your child when he or she follows through.
- Help your child find ways to show anger that do not involve verbally or physically hurting others. When you get angry, use it as an opportunity to model these appropriate responses for your child—and talk about it.
- Help your child understand the value of accepting individual differences.
- Note any disturbing behaviors in your child. For example, frequent angry outbursts, excessive fighting and bullying of other children, cruelty to animals, fire setting, frequent behavior problems at school and in the neighborhood, lack of friends, and alcohol or drug use can be signs of serious problems. Get help for your child. Talk with a trusted professional in your child's school or in the community.
- Keep lines of communication open with your child—even when it is tough. Encourage your child always to let you know where and with whom he or she will be. Get to know your child's friends.
- Listen to your child if he or she shares concerns about friends who may be exhibiting troubling behaviors. Share this information with a trusted professional, such as the school psychologist, principal, or teacher.
- Be involved in your child's school life by supporting and reviewing homework, talking with his or her teacher(s), and attending school functions such as parent conferences, class programs, open houses, and PTA meetings.
- Work with your child's school to make it more responsive to all students and to all families. Share your ideas about how the school can encourage family involvement, welcome **all** families, and include them in meaningful ways in their children's education.
- Encourage your school to offer before- and after-school programs.
- Volunteer to work with school-based groups concerned with violence prevention. If none exist, offer to form one.
- Find out if there is a violence prevention group in your community. Offer to participate in the group's activities.
- Talk with the parents of your child's friends. Discuss how you can form a team to ensure your children's safety.
- Find out if your employer offers provisions for parents to participate in school activities.

selves or others cannot be placed on waiting lists.

- **Make interventions available as early as possible.** Too frequently, interventions are not made available until the student becomes violent or is adjudicated as a youthful offender. Interventions for children who have reached this stage are both costly, restrictive, and relatively inefficient. Effective schools build mechanisms into their intervention processes to ensure that referrals are addressed promptly, and that feedback is provided to the referring individual.
- **Use sustained, multiple, coordinated interventions.** It is rare that children are violent or disruptive only in school. Thus, interventions that are most successful are comprehensive, sustained, and properly implemented. They help families and staff work together to help the child. Coordinated efforts draw resources from community agencies that are respectful of and responsive to the needs of families. Isolated, inconsistent, short-term, and fragmented interventions will not be successful—and may actually do harm.
- **Analyze the contexts in which violent behavior occurs.** School communities can enhance their effectiveness by conducting a functional analysis of the factors that set off violence and problem behaviors. In determining an appropriate course of action, consider the child's age, cultural background, and family experiences and values. Decisions about interventions should be measured against a standard of reasonableness to ensure the likelihood that they will be implemented effectively.
- **Build upon and coordinate internal school resources.** In developing and implementing violence prevention and response plans, effective schools draw upon the resources of various school-based programs and staff—such as special education, safe and drug free school programs, pupil services, and Title I.

Violent behavior is a problem for everyone. It is a normal response to become angry or even frightened in the presence of a violent child. But, it is essential that these emotional reactions be controlled. The goal must always be to ensure safety and seek help for the child.

"Our school system has created a student services team—including the principal, a special educator, the school psychologist, other behavioral support personnel, the child development specialist, and others—that meets weekly to address safety and success for all students. Our teachers and families have easy access to this team. As part of our plan, we conduct a campus-by-campus risk assessment in coordination with city, county, and state law enforcement agencies. We provide interventions for children who are troubled and connect them and their families to community agencies and mental health services."

Lee Patterson
Assistant Superintendent
Roseberg, OR

Intervening Early with Students Who Are at Risk for Behavioral Problems

The incidence of violent acts against students or staff is low. However, pre-violent behaviors—such as threats, bullying, and classroom disruptions—are common. Thus, early responses to warning signs are most effective in preventing problems from escalating.

Intervention programs that reduce behavior problems and related school violence typically are multifaceted, long-term, and broad reaching. They also are rigorously implemented. Effective early intervention efforts include working with small groups or individual students to provide direct support, as well as linking children and their families to necessary community services and/or

Action Steps for Students

▲ ***There is much students can do to help create safe schools. Talk to your teachers, parents, and counselor to find out how you can get involved and do your part to make your school safe. Here are some ideas that students in other schools have tried:***

- Listen to your friends if they share troubling feelings or thoughts. Encourage them to get help from a trusted adult—such as a school psychologist, counselor, social worker, leader from the faith community, or other professional. If you are very concerned, seek help for them. Share your concerns with your parents.
- Create, join, or support student organizations that combat violence, such as "Students Against Destructive Decisions" and "Young Heroes Program."
- Work with local businesses and community groups to organize youth-oriented activities that help young people think of ways to prevent school and community violence. Share your ideas for how these community groups and businesses can support your efforts.
- Organize an assembly and invite your school psychologist, school social worker, and counselor—in addition to student panelists—to share ideas about how to deal with violence, intimidation, and bullying.
- Get involved in planning, implementing, and evaluating your school's violence prevention and response plan.
- Participate in violence prevention programs such as peer mediation and conflict resolution. Employ your new skills in other settings, such as the home, neighborhood, and community.
- Work with your teachers and administrators to create a safe process for reporting threats, intimidation, weapon possession, drug selling, gang activity, graffiti, and vandalism. Use the process.
- Ask for permission to invite a law enforcement officer to your school to conduct a safety audit and share safety tips, such as traveling in groups and avoiding areas known to be unsafe. Share your ideas with the officer.
- Help to develop and participate in activities that promote student understanding of differences and that respect the rights of all.
- Volunteer to be a mentor for younger students and/or provide tutoring to your peers.
- Know your school's code of conduct and model responsible behavior. Avoid being part of a crowd when fights break out. Refrain from teasing, bullying, and intimidating peers.
- Be a role model—take personal responsibility by reacting to anger without physically or verbally harming others.
- Seek help from your parents or a trusted adult—such as a school psychologist, social worker, counselor, teacher—if you are experiencing intense feelings of anger, fear, anxiety, or depression.

providing these services in the school.

Examples of early intervention components that work include:

- Providing training and support to staff, students, and families in understanding factors that can set off and/or exacerbate aggressive outbursts.
- Teaching the child alternative, socially appropriate replacement responses—such as problem solving and anger control skills.
- Providing skill training, therapeutic assistance, and other support to the family through community-based services.
- Encouraging the family to make sure that firearms are out of the child's immediate reach. Law enforcement officers can provide families with information about safe firearm storage as well as guidelines for addressing children's access to and possession of firearms.

"Since we developed the high school peer mediation program, we have seen a decline in physical fights. We are defusing potentially dangerous situations."

Terry Davis, School Psychologist, Natick, MA

In some cases, more comprehensive early interventions are called for to address the needs of troubled children. Focused, coordinated, proven interventions reduce violent behavior. Following are several comprehensive approaches that effective schools are using to provide early intervention to students who are at risk of becoming violent toward themselves or others.

Intervention Tactic: Teaching Positive Interaction Skills

Although most schools do teach positive social interaction skills indirectly, some have adopted social skills programs specifically designed to prevent or reduce antisocial behavior in troubled children. In fact, the direct teaching of social problem solving and social decision making is now a standard feature of most effective drug and violence prevention programs. Children who are at risk of becoming violent toward themselves or others need additional support. They often need to learn interpersonal, problem solving, and conflict resolution skills at home and in school. They also may need more intensive assistance in learning how to stop and think before they react, and to listen effectively.

Intervention Tactic: Providing Comprehensive Services

In some cases, the early intervention may involve getting services to families. The violence prevention and response team together with the child and family designs a comprehensive intervention plan that focuses on reducing aggressive behaviors and supporting responsible behaviors at school, in the home, and in the community. When multiple services are required there also must be psychological counseling and ongoing consultation with classroom teachers, school staff, and the family to ensure intended results occur. All services—including community services—must be coordinated and progress must be monitored and evaluated carefully.

Intervention Tactic: Referring the Child for Special Education Evaluation

If there is evidence of persistent problem behavior or poor academic achievement, it may be ap-

propriate to conduct a formal assessment to determine if the child is disabled and eligible for special education and related services under the ***Individuals with Disabilities Education Act*** (IDEA). If a multidisciplinary team determines that the child is eligible for services under the IDEA, an individualized educational program (IEP) should be developed by a team that includes a parent, a regular educator, a special educator, an evaluator, a representative of the local school district, the child (if appropriate), and others as appropriate. This team will identify the support necessary to enable the child to learn—including the strategies and support systems necessary to address any behavior that may impede the child's learning or the learning of his or her peers.

Providing Intensive, Individualized Interventions for Students with Severe Behavioral Problems

Children who show dangerous patterns and a potential for more serious violence usually require more intensive interventions that involve multiple agencies, community-based service providers, and intense family support. By working with families and community services, schools can comprehensively and effectively intervene.

Effective individualized interventions provide a range of services for students. Multiple, intensive, focused approaches used over time can reduce the chances for continued offenses and the potential for violence. The child, his or her family, and appropriate school staff should be involved in developing and monitoring the interventions.

Nontraditional schooling in an alternative school or therapeutic facility may be required in severe cases where the safety of students and staff remains a concern, or when the complexity of the intervention plan warrants it. Research has shown that effective alternative programs can have long-term positive results by reducing expulsions and court referrals. Effective alternative programs support students in meeting high academic and behavioral standards. They provide anger and impulse control training, psychological counseling, effective academic and remedial instruction, and vocational training as appropriate. Such programs also make provisions for active family involvement. Moreover, they offer guidance and staff support when the child returns to his or her regular school.

Providing a Foundation To Prevent and Reduce Violent Behavior

Schoolwide strategies create a foundation that is more responsive to children in general—**one that makes interventions for individual children more effective and efficient**.

Effective and safe schools are places where there is strong leadership, caring faculty, parent and community involvement—including law enforcement officials—and student participation in the design of programs and policies. Effective and safe schools also are places where prevention and intervention programs are based

"Everyone is trained to use consistent language. We remind students to stop and think. Students also know we will always follow through if they make poor behavioral choices. As a result, we have been able to diffuse violent situations."

Annette Lambeth
Assistant Principal
Chester County, PA

"Appropriate behavior and respect for others are emphasized at all times. However, despite our best efforts, unfortunate incidents do occur. When they do, it is our responsibility to provide appropriate support to meet the needs of every child."

Carol S. Parham,
Superintendent of Schools
Anne Arundel County, MD

upon careful assessment of student problems, where community members help set measurable goals and objectives, where research-based prevention and intervention approaches are used, and where evaluations are conducted regularly to ensure that the programs are meeting stated goals. Effective and safe schools are also places where teachers and staff have access to qualified consultants who can help them address behavioral and academic barriers to learning.

Effective schools ensure that the physical environment of the school is safe, and that schoolwide policies are in place to support responsible behaviors.

"The police are a school's greatest community asset when effectively preventing and responding to school violence. Building a relationship with law enforcement strengthens the school's ability to ensure safety."

Gil Kerlikowske
former Police Commissioner
Buffalo, NY

Characteristics of a Safe Physical Environment

Prevention starts by making sure the school campus is a safe and caring place. Effective and safe schools communicate a strong sense of security. Experts suggest that school officials can enhance physical safety by:

- Supervising access to the building and grounds.
- Reducing class size and school size.
- Adjusting scheduling to minimize time in the hallways or in potentially dangerous locations. Traffic flow patterns can be modified to limit potential for conflicts or altercations.
- Conducting a building safety audit in consultation with school security personnel and/or law enforcement experts. Effective schools adhere to federal, state, and local nondiscrimination and public safety laws, and use guidelines set by the state department of education.
- Closing school campuses during lunch periods.
- Adopting a school policy on uniforms.
- Arranging supervision at critical times (for example, in hallways between classes) and having a plan to deploy supervisory staff to areas where incidents are likely to occur.
- Prohibiting students from congregating in areas where they are likely to engage in rule-breaking or intimidating and aggressive behaviors.
- Having adults visibly present throughout the school building. This includes encouraging parents to visit the school.
- Staggering dismissal times and lunch periods.
- Monitoring the surrounding school grounds—including landscaping, parking lots, and bus stops.
- Coordinating with local police to ensure that there are safe routes to and from school.

In addition to targeting areas for increased safety measures, schools also should identify safe areas where staff and children should go in the event of a crisis.

The physical condition of the school building also has an impact on student attitude, behavior, and motivation to achieve. Typically, there tend to be more incidents of fighting and violence in school buildings that are dirty, too cold or too hot, filled with graffiti, in need of repair, or unsanitary.

Characteristics of Schoolwide Policies that Support Responsible Behavior

The opportunities for inappropriate behaviors that precipitate violence are greater in a disorderly and undisciplined school climate. A growing number of schools are discovering that the most effective way to reduce suspensions, expulsions, office referrals, and other similar actions—strategies that do not result in making schools safer—is to emphasize a proactive approach to discipline.

Effective schools are implementing schoolwide campaigns that establish high expectations and provide support for socially appropriate behavior. They reinforce positive behavior and highlight sanctions against aggressive behavior. All staff, parents, students, and community members are informed about problem behavior, what they can do to counteract it, and how they can reinforce and reward positive behavior. In turn, the entire school community makes a commitment to behaving responsibly.

Effective and safe schools develop and consistently enforce schoolwide rules that are clear, broad-based, and fair. Rules and disciplinary procedures are developed collaboratively by representatives of the total educational community. They are communicated clearly to all parties—but most important, they are followed consistently by everyone.

School communities that have undertaken schoolwide approaches do the following things:

- Develop a schoolwide disciplinary policy that includes a code of conduct, specific rules and consequences that can accommodate student differences on a case-by-case basis when necessary. (If one already exists, review and modify it if necessary.) Be sure to include a description of school anti-harassment and anti-violence policies and due process rights.
- Ensure that the cultural values and educational goals of the community are reflected in the rules. These values should be expressed in a statement that precedes the schoolwide disciplinary policy.
- Include school staff, students, and families in the development, discussion, and implementation of fair rules. Provide schoolwide and classroom support to implement these rules. Strategies that have been found to support students include class discussions, schoolwide assemblies, student government, and participation on discipline teams. In addition, peer mediation and conflict resolution have been implemented widely in schools to promote a climate of nonviolence.
- Be sure consequences are commensurate with the offense, and that rules are written and applied in a nondiscriminatory manner and accommodate cultural diversity.
- Make sure that if a negative consequence (such as withdrawing privileges) is used, it is combined with positive strategies for teaching socially appropriate behaviors and with strategies that address any external factors that might have caused the behavior.
- Include a zero tolerance statement for illegal possession of

"Everyone follows the same discipline plan. Everyone—including the lunch room workers and custodians—works as a team. There are always times when children forget the rules. But there is immediate intervention by faculty and staff, and even other children. The responsibility is on the students."

Anna Allred, Parent
Lakeland, FL

"It is necessary to provide training and support to staff. We have provided inservices on behavior management systems that are effective in regular classroom settings. These inservices have been of great benefit. Numerous schools throughout our district presently use stop and think, conflict resolution, and peer mediation."

Denise Conrad, Teacher
Toledo, OH

weapons, alcohol, or drugs. Provide services and support for students who have been suspended and/or expelled.

Recognizing the warning signs and responding with comprehensive interventions allows us to help children eliminate negative behaviors and replace them with positive ones. Active sharing of information and a quick, effective response by the school community will ensure that the school is safer and the child is less troubled and can learn.

Developing a Prevention and Response Plan

Effective schools create a violence prevention and response plan and form a team that can ensure it is implemented. They use approaches and strategies based on research about what works.

Creating the Violence Prevention and Response Plan

A sound violence prevention and response plan reflects the common and the unique needs of educators, students, families, and the greater community. The plan outlines how all individuals in the school community—administrators, teachers, parents, students, bus drivers, support staff—will be prepared to spot the behavioral and emotional signs that indicate a child is troubled, and what they will need to do. The plan also details how school and community resources can be used to create safe environments and to manage responses to acute threats and incidents of violence.

An effective written plan includes:

- Descriptions of the early warning signs of potentially violent behavior and procedures for identifying children who exhibit these signs.
- Descriptions of effective prevention practices the school community has undertaken to build a foundation that is responsive to **all** children and enhances the effectiveness of interventions.
- Descriptions of intervention strategies the school community can use to help troubled children. These include early interventions for students who are at risk of behavioral problems, and more intensive, individualized interventions and resources for students with severe behavioral problems or mental health needs.
- A crisis intervention plan that includes immediate responses for imminent warning signs and violent behavior, as well as a contingency plan to be used in the aftermath of a tragedy.

The plan must be consistent with federal, state, and local laws. It also should have the support of families and the local school board.

Recommendations in this guide will prove most meaningful when the entire school community is involved in developing and implementing the plan. In addition, everyone should be provided with relevant training and support on a regular basis. Finally, there should be a clearly delineated mechanism for monitoring and assessing violence prevention efforts.

Forming the Prevention and Response Team

It can be helpful to establish a school-based team to oversee the preparation and implementation of the prevention and response plan. This does not need to be a new team; however, a designated core group should be entrusted with this important responsibility.

"Our district initiated a safety task force involving parents, students, teachers, support staff, administrators, and community members to enhance our plan for safety and crisis management. It works."

Richard E. Berry,
Superintendent, Houston, TX

The core team should ensure that every member of the greater school community accepts and adopts the violence prevention and response plan. This buy-in is essential if all members of the school community are expected to feel comfortable sharing concerns about children who appear troubled. Too often, caring individuals remain silent because they have no way to express their concerns.

Typically, the core team includes the building administrator, general and special education teachers, parent(s), and a pupil support services representative (a school psychologist, social worker, or counselor), school resource officer, and a safe and drug-free schools program coordinator. If no school psychologist or mental health professional is available to the staff, involve someone from an outside mental health agency. Other individuals may be added to the team depending on the task. For example, when undertaking schoolwide prevention planning, the team might be expanded to include students, representatives of community agencies and organizations, the school nurse, school board members, and support staff (secretaries, bus drivers, and custodians). Similarly, crisis response planning can be enhanced with the presence of a central office administrator, security officer, and youth officer or community police team member.

"We need to give attention to the segment of the population that includes bus drivers, secretaries, and cafeteria workers. They are a very important yet often overlooked group of people who can provide support to children."

Betty Stockton
School Psychologist
Jonesboro, AR

The core team also should coordinate with any school advisory boards already in place. For example, most effective schools have developed an advisory board of parents and community leaders that meets regularly with school administrators. While these advisory groups generally offer advice and support, that role can be expanded to bringing resources related to violence prevention and intervention into the school.

Consider involving a variety of community leaders and parents when building the violence prevention and response team:

- Parent group leaders, such as PTA officers.
- Law enforcement personnel.
- Attorneys, judges, and probation officers.
- Clergy and other representatives of the faith community.
- Media representatives.
- Violence prevention group representatives.
- Mental health and child welfare personnel.
- Physicians and nurses.
- Family agency and family resource center staff.
- Business leaders.
- Recreation, cultural, and arts organizations staff.
- Youth workers and volunteers.
- Local officials, including school board members and representatives from special commissions.

Action Planning Checklist

Prevention-Intervention-Crisis Response

▲ ***What To Look For—Key Characteristics of Responsive and Safe Schools***

Does my school have characteristics that:

__ Are responsive to all children?

▲ ***What To Look For—Early Warning Signs of Violence***

Has my school taken steps to ensure that all staff, students, and families:

__ Understand the principles underlying the identification of early warning signs?

__ Know how to identify and respond to imminent warning signs?

__ Are able to identify early warning signs?

▲ ***What To Do—Intervention: Getting Help for Troubled Children***

Does my school:

__ Understand the principles underlying intervention?

__ Make early intervention available for students at risk of behavioral problems?

__ Provide individualized, intensive interventions for students with severe behavioral problems?

__ Have schoolwide preventive strategies in place that support early intervention?

▲ ***What To Do—Crisis Response***

Does my school:

__ Understand the principles underlying crisis response?

__ Have a procedure for intervening during a crisis to ensure safety?

__ Know how to respond in the aftermath of tragedy?

- Interest group representatives and grass roots community organization members.
- College or university faculty.
- Members of local advisory boards.
- Other influential community members.

The school board should authorize and support the formation of and the tasks undertaken by the violence prevention and response team.

While we cannot prevent all violence from occurring, we can do much to reduce the likelihood of its occurrence. Through thoughtful planning and the establishment of a school violence prevention and response team, we can avert many crises and be prepared when they do happen.

Responding to Crisis

Violence can happen at any time, anywhere. Effective and safe schools are well prepared for any potential crisis or violent act.

Crisis response is an important component of a violence prevention and response plan. Two components that should be addressed in that plan are:

- Intervening during a crisis to ensure safety.
- Responding in the aftermath of tragedy.

In addition to establishing a contingency plan, effective schools provide adequate preparation for their core violence prevention and response team. The team not only plans what to do when violence strikes, but it also ensures that staff and students know how to behave. Students and staff feel secure because there is a well-conceived plan and everyone understands what to do or whom to ask for instructions.

Principles Underlying Crisis Response

As with other interventions, crisis intervention planning is built on a foundation that is safe and responsive to children. Crisis planning should include:

- Training for teachers and staff in a range of skills—from dealing with escalating classroom situations to responding to a serious crisis.
- Reference to district or state procedures. Many states now have recommended crisis intervention manuals available to their local education agencies and schools.
- Involvement of community agencies, including police, fire, and rescue, as well as hospital, health, social welfare, and mental health services. The faith community, juvenile justice, and related family support systems also have been successfully included in such team plans.
- Provision for the core team to meet regularly to identify potentially troubled or violent students and situations that may be dangerous.

Effective school communities also have made a point to find out about federal, state, and local resources that are available to help during and after a crisis, and to secure their support and involvement **before** a crisis occurs.

Intervening During a Crisis To Ensure Safety

Weapons used in or around schools, bomb threats or explosions, and fights, as well as natural disasters, accidents, and suicides call for immediate, planned

action, and long-term, post-crisis intervention. Planning for such contingencies reduces chaos and trauma. Thus, the crisis response part of the plan also must include contingency provisions. Such provisions may include:

- Evacuation procedures and other procedures to protect students and staff from harm. It is critical that schools identify safe areas where students and staff should go in a crisis. It also is important that schools practice having staff and students evacuate the premises in an orderly manner.
- An effective, fool-proof communication system. Individuals must have designated roles and responsibilities to prevent confusion.
- A process for securing immediate external support from law enforcement officials and other relevant community agencies.

All provisions and procedures should be monitored and reviewed regularly by the core team.

Just as staff should understand and practice fire drill procedures routinely, they should practice responding to the presence of firearms and other weapons, severe threats of violence, hostage situations, and other acts of terror. School communities can provide staff and students with such practice in the following ways:

- Provide inservice training for all faculty and staff to explain the plan and exactly what to do in a crisis. Where appropriate, include community police, youth workers, and other community members.
- Produce a written manual or small pamphlet or flip chart to remind teachers and staff of their duties.
- Practice responding to the imminent warning signs of violence. Make sure **all** adults in the building have an understanding of what they might do to prevent violence (e.g., being observant, knowing when to get help, and modeling good problem solving, anger management, and/or conflict resolution skills) and how they can safely support each other.

"Early intervention and quick response from our school district team resulted in no one getting hurt."

Pamela Cain
Superintendent
Wirt County, WV

Responding in the Aftermath of Crisis

Members of the crisis team should understand natural stress reactions. They also should be familiar with how different individuals might respond to death and loss, including developmental considerations, religious beliefs, and cultural values.

Effective schools ensure a coordinated community response. Professionals both within the school district and within the greater community should be involved to assist individuals who are at risk for severe stress reactions.

Schools that have experienced tragedy have included the following provisions in their response plans:

- **Help parents understand children's reactions to violence**. In the aftermath of tragedy, children may experience unrealistic fears of the future, have difficulty sleeping, become physically ill, and be easily distracted—to name a few of the common symptoms.
- **Help teachers and other staff deal with their reactions to the crisis**. Debriefing and grief

Crisis Procedure Checklist

▲ ***A crisis plan must address many complex contingencies. There should be a step-by-step procedure to use when a crisis occurs. An example follows:***

__ Assess life/safety issues immediately.

__ Provide immediate emergency medical care.

__ Call 911 and notify police/rescue first. Call the superintendent second.

__ Convene the crisis team to assess the situation and implement the crisis response procedures.

__ Evaluate available and needed resources.

__ Alert school staff to the situation.

__ Activate the crisis communication procedure and system of verification.

__ Secure all areas.

__ Implement evacuation and other procedures to protect students and staff from harm. Avoid dismissing students to unknown care.

__ Adjust the bell schedule to ensure safety during the crisis.

__ Alert persons in charge of various information systems to prevent confusion and misinformation. Notify parents.

__ Contact appropriate community agencies and the school district's public information office, if appropriate.

__ Implement post-crisis procedures.

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counseling is just as important for adults as it is for students.

- **Help students and faculty adjust after the crisis.** Provide both short-term and long-term mental health counseling following a crisis.
- **Help victims and family members of victims re-enter the school environment.** Often, school friends need guidance in how to act. The school community should work with students and parents to design a plan that makes it easier for victims and their classmates to adjust.
- **Help students and teachers address the return of a previously removed student to the school community**. Whether the student is returning from a juvenile detention facility or a mental health facility, schools need to coordinate with staff from that facility to explore how to make the transition as uneventful as possible.

Conclusion

Crises involving sudden violence in schools are traumatic in large measure because they are rare and unexpected. Everyone is touched in some way. In the wake of such a crisis, members of the school community are asked—and ask themselves—what could have been done to prevent it.

We know from the research that schools can meet the challenge of reducing violence. The school community can be supported through:

- School board policies that address both prevention and intervention for troubled children and youth.
- Schoolwide violence prevention and response plans that include the entire school community in their development and implementation.
- Training in recognizing the early warning signs of potential violent behavior.
- Procedures that encourage staff, parents, and students to share their concerns about children who exhibit early warning signs.
- Procedures for responding quickly to concerns about troubled children.
- Adequate support in getting help for troubled children.

Everyone who cares about children cares about ending violence. It is time to break the silence that too often characterizes even the most well-meaning school communities. Research and expert-based information is available for school communities to use in developing and strengthening programs that can prevent crises.

School safety is everyone's job. Teachers, administrators, parents, community members, and students all must commit to meeting the challenge of getting help for children who show signs of being troubled.

"Coordinated school efforts can help. But the solution does not just rest in the schools. Together we must develop solutions that are community-wide and coordinated, that include schools, families, courts, law enforcement, community agencies, representatives of the faith community, business, and the broader community."

Wilmer Cody, Kentucky Commissioner of Education

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Methodology, Contributors, and Research Support

Also On The Web

- An annotated version of the guide with references to support each assertion as well as references to practical materials that can be employed to implement the recommendations it contains.
- Additional resources that can be employed to implement the recommendations contained in the guide.
- Links to other Web sites that provide useful and usable information.
- English and Spanish versions of the guide that can be downloaded for dissemination.

This guide synthesizes an extensive knowledge base on violence and violence prevention. It includes research from a variety of disciplines, as well as the experience and effective practices of teachers, school psychologists, counselors, social workers, family members, youth workers, and youth.

Much of the research found in this guide was funded by federal offices whose senior staff were involved in supporting and reviewing this document. They include:

- Office of Special Education Programs, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, U.S. Department of Education.
- Safe and Drug-Free Schools Program, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, U.S. Department of Education.
- Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention and National Institute for Justice, U.S. Department of Justice.
- National Institute of Mental Health and Center for Mental Health Services, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

The guide was produced by the Center for Effective Collaboration and Practice of the American Institutes for Research in collaboration with the National Association of School Psychologists. The project was led by:

- **Kevin P. Dwyer**, Principal Investigator, National Association of School Psychologists
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The guide was developed in collaboration with **Cynthia Warger** of Warger, Eavy and Associates.

Each assertion in the guide is backed by empirical data and/or expert consensus. Research references can be found on the project's Web site at **http://www.air-dc.org/cecp/guide**.

The guide was conceptualized by an interdisciplinary expert panel. The writing team, led by Kevin P. Dwyer, included members of the expert panel—George Bear, Norris Haynes, Paul Kingery, Howard Knoff, Peter Sheras, Russell Skiba, Leslie Skinner, and Betty Stockton—in addition to David Osher and Cynthia Warger. The writing team drew upon the other expert panelists for guidance and for resources.

The first draft was reviewed for accuracy by the entire expert panel as well as staff from the federal agencies. The federal reviewers are listed on the project's Web site at **http://www.air-dc.org/cecp/guide**.

The second draft was reviewed by family members, teachers, principals, and youth, in addition to leaders of major national associations. The expert panel reviewed the document again at this stage. These reviewers are also listed on the project's Web site at **http://www.air-dc.org/cecp/guide**.

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http://www.mentalhealth.org/index.htm

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